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THE REGISTER CITIZEN

Opinion: Pandemic highlights need for preparation

By Christine M. Tenore
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*Photo: Getty Images; A long line of cars waits at a drive-through COVID-19 testing site **NOTE: photo not used in print edition***

The COVID pandemic continues to confirm the urgency for individuals and their families to be prepared for a health crisis.

Shockingly, only one in 20 intensive care unit patients have health directives and powers of attorney. Given the pandemic, the need for such preparation is underscored day after day — especially since the contagious nature of the virus prevents us from being with our loved ones in person.

How do we help family — aging parents, in particular — accept the need for assistance? Foremost, give our loved ones the respect they deserve — along with all those groceries so many adult children have been bringing to their parents' doorsteps. As the virus keeps us apart, not allowing us to visit, leaving the crisis planning for a “rainy day” is not an option.

In some ways, the pandemic has opened the door for discussion of topics too many try to avoid. So many of us have read about or have close friends who have been precluded from being by the side of an ailing family member. As well, there are those individuals dealing with debilitating

conditions who have been unable to take care of financial matters that normally might just mean a simple trip to the bank, perhaps along with a stop with friends for a cup of coffee.

The pandemic should be a reminder for everyone of the need to have documents in place to help and protect us during a crisis. We need documents that can stand the test of time in case we become unable to create new ones at some point in the future or maybe simply forget to update what was signed years or even decades earlier.

Some suggest that more detailed expressions of a person's wishes might be important during this pandemic because life or death decisions today may not be as clear cut as those under other, more normal circumstances. The virus leaves us wondering what if ... what if.

In addition to the traditional living will and appointment of a health care proxy, a trusted person who can speak for us, we have the option to create a comparatively new document known as Five Wishes.

No attorney is needed for this document. It is more specific as to not only who you would like to make decisions for your care, but the kind of medical treatment that you do or do not want, how comfortable you would like to be, what people, if allowed by the medical team, you'd want with you, and what you want your loved ones to know. Five Wishes has been recognized in 42 states, including Connecticut, New York and Massachusetts.

Given the pressure that everyone is under, especially our medical service providers who often have to make quick decisions, standard legal documents must be presented in a familiar form so that they can be read quickly in an emergency.

The message is very important. Doing nothing is, in effect, its own decision. As a result, under a legal concept known as "Parens Patriae," the state must make decisions for you if you don't have legal documents in place that state your own wishes.

If you want to be in control, you can. It takes planning — planning everyone should consider ... not just the elderly.

Attorney Christine M. Tenore is a partner in the Fairfield-based law firm of Elovson & Tenore. She can be reached at 203-366-2566 or ct@connecticutelderlaw.com. Her focus is on estate planning and administration, wills and trusts, probate and conservatorships, and elder law including spousal asset protection.